

## POLITICS AND JAZZ

by Ian Muldoon\*

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"Mankind's sole salvation lies in everyone making everything their business."

-Anonymous

"I ask you this question  
Cause I want to know  
How long I got to fight  
BOTH HITLER-AND JIM CROW."

-Langston Hughes



*Jazz poet (James Mercer) Langston Hughes...*

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*\*Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour.*

“The thing that’s really great about jazz is that it’s a real, vital, contemporary music. It’s representative of everyone on this planet. This is the first music that is technically, and spiritually, representative of all of us.”

-Lester Bowie



*American trumpeter Lester Bowie... PHOTO CREDIT JORGE KRUGER*

“No human motion reveals more of what is human and how it interacts with the non-human than improvisation on musical instruments.”

-Brian Morton



*Scottish jazz writer Brian Morton...PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ JOURNAL*

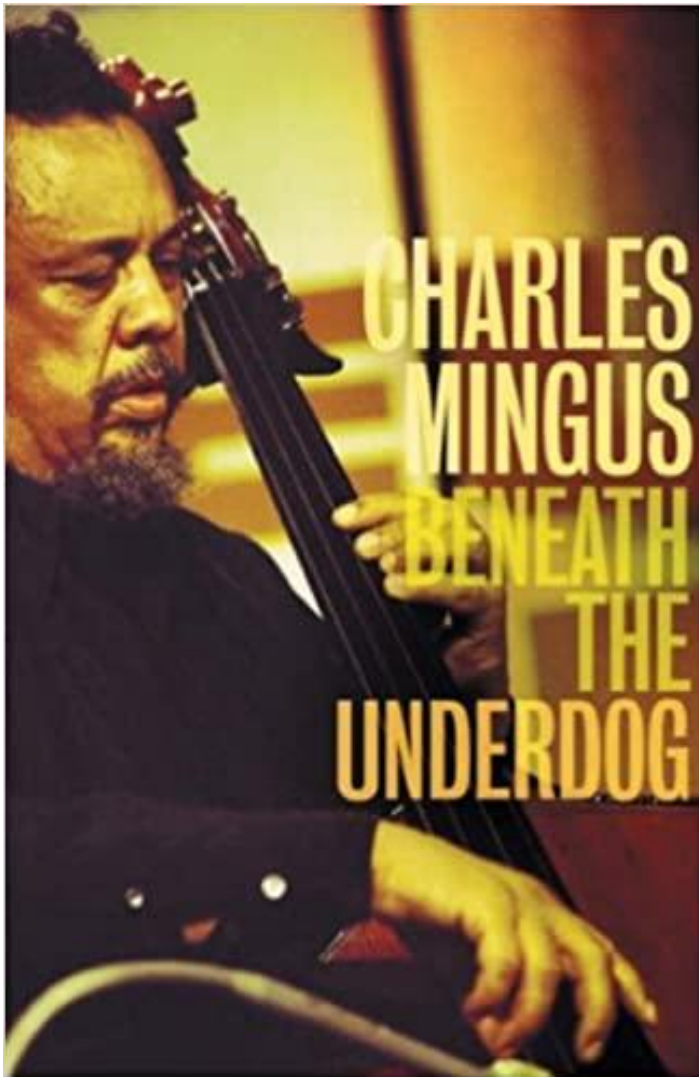
'Today more jazz musicians than ever are expressing social engagement through music. Matt Moran (vibraphone) has put his convictions into direct action, through his work with Carnegie Hall's Musical Connections program. He serves as a (white) music teacher to inmates at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, co-leading a program (which is temporarily on hold because of the pandemic) with vocalist Sarah Elizabeth Charles (teacher at The New School for Jazz and Contemporary Music.) Moran says "Systemic racism and mass incarceration have led to enormous numbers of people being locked up in this country. They are often forgotten and are doing their best not to atrophy. I work with 25 participants, both beginners and experienced players, who are allowed access to the music room. They are all deeply committed to the power of music and are maintaining a positive inner life against incredible odds. It has been inspiring and humbling for me to know them."

*-Jazztimes 23/10/20).*



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**J**azz has always been political. Its beginnings arose from an oppressed people whose creative urges were rooted in protest songs about poverty, hope, loss, and a yearning for freedom. The nature of jazz was a threat to "correct" music, to Western musical traditions, musical standards, established musical genres and music education. Its practitioners in the beginning were a perceived lowly people - it was street music, music of gin mills, brothels, and slaves, music that was (so to speak) apart from the popular, especially middle-class lives and their entertainment, and was "beneath the underdog" in the phrase of Charles Mingus (the title of his autobiography). Jazz was, and perhaps remains to some, an affront to the musical "establishment". My first encounters with it were unencumbered by any preconceived notions of what was "good" music and what was "bad". It seemed as vital and enchanting as nature itself. But I was confused by the attitude of many to those who created this music.



I heard this astonishingly beautiful, emotionally powerful music from a very early age, and yet I also learnt that those that made it were treated like shit - and I deliberately use the vernacular of the vulgate - which is how a Prince of the music Charlie Parker described the language he used when speaking the patois (or jive) of African Americans (vernacular is derived from *verna* being Latin for 'home-born slave'). Indeed, Charles Parker Jr, a musical genius, a highly intelligent, articulate, highly sensitive and influential artist, was just another "nigger", and his short life may stand as a paradigm of how society and its political forces can sap the life of the creative artist, and especially a black artist, in a racist society.

As Paul Keating quipped about John Howard - you can't polish a turd. In short, if you're born African American you'll always be African American. To hear the joy of Fats Waller, or the majestic trumpet of Louis Armstrong, to see the elegant Duke Ellington on film and hear his wondrous orchestra, was mightily confusing to a little boy. I also learnt that Irene, the beautiful mother of my friend and next door neighbour Ken Nichols, at 10 Parkes Street, Manly Vale "had a touch of the tar" and was "an Abo from Narrabri". So I asked around: "What's an Abo from Narrabri?" "It's a coon. A black. Narrabri's full of coons."



*To hear the joy of Fats Waller (left) or the majestic trumpet of Louis Armstrong (below), to see the elegant Duke Ellington (far below) on film and hear his wondrous orchestra, was mightily confusing to a little boy...*





The more questions I asked, the more disturbing and confusing it became. Especially confusing was to learn that my best friend at 16 years of age, Hugh Sinclair, was of Aboriginal heritage - the only Aboriginal of our cohort of 120 as far as we knew. He won the Rolls Royce Award for the most accomplished first year RAAF apprentice and was the drummer in the RAAF Base Wagga Band. On the one hand there was this labelling of black people, of Aboriginal people, as inferior and alien, and on the other hand the source of my happiness was through black music, and one source of pride was my friendship with Aboriginal Hugh, the top apprentice. What was also confusing was that the black people I experienced were attractive to me, and many of the whites were unattractive, especially when voicing ugly words. It was also a shock to learn that my beautiful neighbour Mrs Irene Nichols and her Aboriginal kin were not allowed to vote until 1967 - they were not considered "citizens". I began to see how politics meant power which affected our everyday life.

As to the political ramifications of being black in the country of the music's birth, the former longest serving Premier of NSW and former foreign minister Bob Carr opined on 8/1/21 (*Sydney Morning Herald* "Capitol Chaos Only The First Act") that a substantial percentage of "white" Americans believe they are losing control to African Americans, so "extreme measures may be justified to preserve a traditional America." For the first time since the British burning of the White House in 1814, the Capitol was invaded by white supremacists and other white supporters of Donald Trump. Slaveholding was established in the 17th and 18th centuries by the States of Delaware, Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina, Virginia, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri, Arkansas, Florida, and Texas. Ever since, race has been the cancer that has eaten away at the "world's most powerful democracy". To Australians, as Carr points out, it's hard for us to appreciate how powerful this cultural force has been in shaping the USA. Jazz has been central, at the very heart of the struggle by African Americans, to overcome this deep-seated legacy of slavery.



*Bob Carr: a substantial percentage of "white" Americans believe they are losing control to African Americans so "extreme measures may be justified to preserve a traditional America"...*

As a young boy drawn in by this astonishingly beautiful music that seemed to breathe life - the joy, the melancholy, the rhythm, the rage, the humour - I learnt that the creative energy of the music was born of a yearning for freedom - freedom from want, freedom from slavery, and a universal creative need to use music as a means of expression, of communication, of feeling. The blues gave voice to this yearning, and to protest. Is it possible that the yearning for freedom was one universally desired? Is it possible that the values of a music, its themes, its poetry, were noble goals that anyone could aspire to? One of those values (voiced by Charlie Haden I think) was that “everyone can make a difference” no matter how humble. My goal was understanding so, whilst still serving in the RAAF, I studied politics at the University of New England under the late Professor Colin Tatz, whose specialty was politics in sport. As an expatriate South African of Jewish descent, he was quite familiar with how sport was used as a political weapon against the Apartheid regime.



*The late Professor Colin Tatz whose specialty was politics in sport: an expatriate South African of Jewish descent...*

Colin Tatz was a wonderful intellectual mentor (if I may describe him as such) who invited the first Aboriginal Senator of the Australian Federal Parliament to meet our 2nd Year university class. Senator Neville Bonner, a gentle and humble man, was an elder of the Jagera people. Professor Tatz also enjoined us to understand the most effective weapon in the fight for human rights was the law and education. It was Charlie Haden and Colin Tatz who fuelled my interest in politics and human rights and education as a force for change.

Cut to Uralla, Northern Tablelands of NSW, and four adults, Annie, Leah, Charles, and Ian, lying on bean bags smoking Mary Jane and solving the problems of the world:

*Charles: Well what are we doing to help save the planet?*

*Ian: I bought a push bike and a motor bike to use when the car was unnecessary.*

*Annie: How very First World.*

*Charlie: Well, I've made my mind up. I am going to Nicaragua to help the natives pick coffee. There's a war going on there.*

*Ian: But Charlie, you're from Moree. I did my practice teaching there in 1979. It's a very racist town. Help your Aboriginal neighbours! They need you too!*

*Charlie: I've seen enough of Moree. I've already got my passport. I'm going.*

*Ian (taking a deep drag of my roach): If you go to South America I'm going to Moree!*

*Charlie: Bullshit. I don't believe you.*

*Leah: How far is it from here?*

*Ian: About three hours but it seems like another country compared to Armidale and Uralla. It could be socially and economically and mentally as far as Nicaragua.*

In the event, Charlie went to South America. As for me, there was no vacancy at Moree High School but there was at Walgett High School, a short drive south of Moree. I taught at Walgett High School for five years, teaching mainly Aboriginal children and committing one overtly political act, which was to be instrumental in getting the NSW Teachers Federation to protest to the Minister for Education that a student exchange programme with the apartheid regime of South Africa was wrong, especially as they were planning on sending a white student to a mainly black school in Walgett. The Minister, Rodney Cavalier, agreed and permanently cancelled the programme for all students at all NSW schools. Charlie Haden was right - even the lowly, even an ordinary teacher, can make a difference. However, artists, some argue, have a power and a responsibility, a moral leverage that can be used for good. But to be creative, others argue, to be an artist at all, is in and of itself enough - politics is best left to politicians.



*Charlie Haden (left) was right - even the lowly, even an ordinary teacher, can make a difference...*



To be an individual artist is to be consumed with the lone creative self, to doubt, and to be highly sensitive to any milieu. To be a politician is to have a powerful sense of right, to have few doubts, to suffer much criticism happily, and to relish company. The artist resists organisations and sees a union or collective, or Unions, as anathema. The politician must organise and sees associations, clubs, Guilds, religious institutions or Unions, as essential to success.

In the 21st Century it's likely that the incontestable political art of Ai Wei Wei will establish itself amongst the most significant art of this Century. Although art has always been a rich source for artistic expression of all kinds, the politics in art, and of art, has been frequently misunderstood or ignored. Without venturing into the world of media studies, it's obvious to the layperson that the visual arts - cinema, television, advertising - have been vital in constructing a world view that is conducive to particular economic powers or social constructs.



*Ai Wei Wei: in the 21st Century it's likely that his incontestable political art will establish itself amongst the most significant art of this century...*

Hollywood has been especially successful at propagating a world view of American exceptionalism, yet it may not see such propaganda as “political”. It's interesting to note that in 2021 one of the most popular films of all time, *Gone With The Wind* (1939) was withdrawn by Netflix because of its racism. This is not “political correctness” but recognition of the power of cinema to shape views. Harry Warner of Warner Brothers fame used to advise film producers to take playwright Moss Hart's advice about making political statements in films: “if you have a message call Western Union.”

In reality, especially since the 18th century, art has been used to criticise and mock and to reveal wrongs: Jonathan Swift 1729 (*A Modest Proposal*) and his criticism of English/Irish politics; Charles Dickens and his 19th century works which brought attention to the poor laws, education, child abuse, transportation of criminals to Australia, and other social justice themes; Upton Sinclair 1906 (*The Jungle*) and his exposé of the exploitation of immigrants; Rachel Carson's 1962 (*Silent Spring*) about chemicals in the environment and the decimation of birds and insects; George Orwell's 1945 (*Animal Farm*) and in 1949 (*1984*), which foresaw omnipresent government and corporate surveillance (cf *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* by Shoshana Zuboff, Profile, London, 2019); Joseph Heller's 1961 *Catch 22* and his satire on WW11; are just a few instances in literature.

In the visual arts, Goya, Picasso and Andy Warhol (cf his *Electric Chair*) are prominent, with Ai Wei Wei being the most recent instance of Art used to focus on human rights. In cinema *The Birth Of a Nation* (1916) saw the rebirth of the KKK and the embedding of racist attitudes in a generation of Americans; and in *Triumph of the Will* (1935) Leni Riefenstahl's brilliance gave visual form to the Nazi ideology of the godlike nature of the German Reich and its people.



*Leni Riefenstahl (centre) with Joseph Goebbels (left) and Adolf Hitler (right): her brilliance gave visual form to the Nazi ideology of the godlike nature of the German Reich and its people...*

Chinese propaganda is mainly focused internally, but its image internationally is strictly controlled as much as it can be.

The adjective “political” in art and the noun “politics” is used in this essay to mean propaganda; protest; the franchise; the law; Government regulation; in short, it's used in its broadest possible meaning - where a group organises to control another

group to its detriment that's a political act - where an individual protests at that control, that's a political act - lynching is a political act - resisting Aboriginal Land Rights is a political act - Holocaust denial is a political act - wearing a National flag badge pinned to one's collar or displaying the National flag from one's home, is a political act. Sometimes art is used as a political tract, or to highlight injustice, or to reflect a lyrical abstract response to engender a mood or feeling about an issue.

Much art may be seen as being just about itself. Minimalism may be the ultimate art about art, but its appeal and power are confined to an elite niche. But for hundreds of years portraiture of wealthy families and Royalty have been about propagating the image of success and power. On a smaller scale in Australia Ken Done might be an example of pretty illustration with an absence of any meaning, whilst 2020 Archibald winner Vincent Namatjira draws attention to Aboriginal pride in his *Stand Strong For Who You Are*. In music, especially in the 20th century, mainly owing to the reach of mass communications, music in politics has blossomed, especially in the music known as jazz, and the major source of its genesis, the blues.

*Yellow Dog Blues* (W C Handy, 1915) a 'Yellow-Dog' Democrat is a slang term for an individual who would vote for the Democratic candidate, no matter who ran, 'even a yeller dog.' Bessie Smith recorded this blues in 1925. In 1929 she also recorded the Jimmy Cox blues *Nobody knows you when you down and out*: "In my pocket not one penny, and my friends I haven't any".



*Bessie Smith in 1920:  
hugely popular, much loved  
and admired, and very  
influential...*

Bessie Smith was hugely popular, much loved and admired, and very influential. A later blues artist who was also popular from the 1930s into the 1950s, was Big Bill Broonzy who wrote and recorded one of the seminal political songs:

*Me and a man was workin' side by side  
This is what it meant  
They was paying him a dollar an hour  
And they was paying me fifty cent  
They said if you was white, 't should be all right  
If you was brown, could stick around  
But as you black, m-mm boy, git back git back git back*

-(*Black, Brown and White*) Broonzy 1938

J B Lenoir recorded *Alabama Blues* in 1965:

*never will go back to Alabama,  
that is not the place for me  
I never will go back to Alabama,  
that is not the place for me  
You know they killed my sister and my brother  
And the whole world let them peoples go down there free*

Popular songs that had an impact include *Strange Fruit* (Abel Meeropol) sung by Billie Holiday in 1939:

*Southern trees bear a strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze  
Strange fruit hangin' from the poplar trees*

and *Mississippi Goddam* (1964) by Nina Simone:

*The name of this tune is Mississippi Goddam  
And I mean every word of it  
Alabama's gotten me so upset  
Tennessee made me lose my rest*

In jazz the most overtly political artists included two of the best; both were named Charles and both were masters of the acoustic bass: Mingus and Haden. Both emerged after the cataclysmic events of WW11 in which the political systems of totalitarianism and fascism faced off against democracy. Democracy and Communism managed to overcome Hitler's totalitarianism and Mussolini's fascism, but at extraordinary cost - as one small example, the Germans burnt all buildings and massacred all inhabitants of 628 villages in Beloruss (Byelorussian SSR). Though the causes of WW11 are complex, it became evident that, to a considerable extent, the German people sleep-walked into the events that led to Hitler's rise, and thus highlighted the fact that real engagement by all citizens in the political systems, and universal public education, are important to the health and effectiveness of a country. Mingus composed the following poem with that theme, entitled *Don't Let It Happen Here*.

*One day they came and they took the communists,  
And I said nothing because I was not a communist.  
Then one day they burned the Catholic churches,  
And I said nothing because I was born a Protestant.  
One day they came and took the unionists,  
And I said nothing because I was not a unionist.  
One day they came and took the people of the Jewish faith,  
And I said nothing because I had no faith left.  
Then one day they came and took me,  
And I could say nothing as I was as guilty as they were,  
For not speaking out and saying that all men have a right to freedom.  
Oh, Lord, don't let it happen here...  
Yes, I was guilty...as guilty as they were for not speaking out and saying that all  
men and women have a right to freedom.  
So... don't let it happen here.*

*(see Blues and Politics Mingus Big Band, Dreyfus Jazz, 1999)*



*Charles Mingus: he wrote the poem "Don't Let It Happen Here"...*

African Americans who were required to defend their country in segregated units, contributing mightily to defending America, nevertheless suffered, on their return, Jim Crow laws. A new awareness of human rights and the promises of the Constitution became the *cri du coeur* of many emerging jazz artists. One of the most powerful and intelligent and informed voices was Charles Mingus, who emerged not just as a master bassist, but as a major composer and musical leader, whose impact has been as historically and artistically significant as any jazz musician, and who is considered the spiritual successor to Duke Ellington as well as musically, by playing to the strengths of each member of his various groups.



Mingus worked in the bands of Louis Armstrong, Kid Ory, Barney Bigard, Lionel Hampton, Fats Navarro, and Red Norvo (his trio). He founded Debut Records which recorded and released *The Greatest Jazz Concert at Massey Hall*. Max Roach said in 1991: “There was nothing in Charles’s music that America couldn’t forgive. This is a country that can absorb anything and take the sting out of it. What it couldn’t forgive was that a black man should want to take control of the means of production, even of his own production.”



*Max Roach (left) pictured with Charles Mingus: what the US couldn’t forgive was that a black man should want to take control of the means of production, even of his own production... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ REFLECTIONS*



*L-R, Duke Ellington, Charles Mingus & Max Roach during the recording of “Money Jungle” in 1962...*

Mingus recorded with Duke Ellington on *Money Jungle* in New York 17/9/62, with Max Roach on drums. Unusually for Mingus, all the compositions were by Ellington except *Caravan* by Juan Tizol. Mingus was much influenced by Ellington but, at this stage of his career, it was unusual for him to be in support as it were - a signal measure of respect for the great Duke. In terms of composing his words are instructive, and reveal his creative methodology:

*First, a jazz composition as I hear it in my mind's ear - although set down in so many notes on score paper and precisely notated - cannot be played by either a group of either jazz musicians or classical musicians. A classical musician may read off the notes correctly but play them without the correct jazz feeling or interpretation, and a jazz musician, although he might read all the notes and play them with jazz feeling, inevitably introduces his own individual expression rather than the dynamics the composer intended. Secondly, jazz, by its very definition, cannot be held down to written parts to be played with a feeling that goes only with blowing free.*

*My present working methods use very little written material. I 'write' compositions on mental score paper, then I lay out the composition part by part to the musicians. I play them the 'framework' on piano so that they are familiar with my interpretation and feeling and with the scale and chord progressions to be used. Each man's particular style is taken into consideration. They are given different rows of notes to use against each chord but they choose their own notes and play them in their own style, from scales as well as chords, except where a particular mood is indicated. In this way I can keep my own compositional flavour in the pieces and yet allow the musicians more individual freedom in the creation of their group lines and solos." (Quoted in liner notes to "Mingus Ah Um" (1959) by Diane Dorr-Dorynek).*

Mingus was 33 years old when he released the album *Pithecanthropus Erectus* (1956) and, on first listening, the impact of this quintet is profound. Mingus is on bass; Jackie McLean on alto sax; J R Monterose, tenor sax; Mal Waldron, piano; and Willie Jones, drums.



Not since Duke Ellington did an extended work have such an impact, and its contribution - especially the band's power in the violent C section of the piece - was a precursor to such works as Coleman's *Free Jazz* and Coltrane's *Ascension*. Mingus explained the title as depicting the rise of man from his hominid roots (Pithecanthropus Erectus) to an eventual downfall owing to "his own failure to realize the inevitable emancipation of those he sought to enslave, and his greed in attempting to stand on a false security."

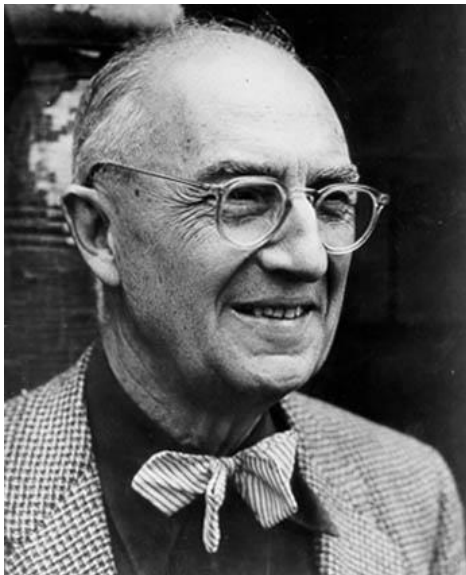
*Haitian Fight Song; It Was a Lonely Day in Selma, Alabama; Meditations For A Pair Of Wire-cutters;* and *Fables of Faubus*, are some of the overtly political works composed and recorded by Mingus. His music is characterised by powerful rhythms, collective free improvisation, gospel ecstasy, and looseness - sudden changes of tempo and shouts of encouragement. As can be seen, Mingus was sensitive to the power of language and in 1958 collaborated with one of America's finest poets to help compose and arrange and conduct with Leonard Feather the music for an album of jazz/poetry called *Weary Blues*. Mrs Ornette Coleman (poet Jayne Cortez) was involved in the selection of poems.



There had been quite a surge of interest in jazz/poetry performances in the USA in 1957, at a time when pure jazz had been recognised as a serious art form. There was an especially vibrant scene in San Francisco where so-called Beat poets had jazz combo support in readings by *inter alia* Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Ken Nordine that same year recorded *Word Jazz*, a series of spoken narratives composed in conjunction with cellist Fred Katz, backed by Chico Hamilton, Ralph Pena et al.

In 1958 *Jazz Canto*, a very beautiful and quite revelatory album of poems, was recorded with the groups of Ralph Pena, Gerry Mulligan, Bob Dorough, and Chico Hamilton. Poems by Walt Whitman, Dylan Thomas, Lawrence Lipton, Buddy

Collette, William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Philip Whalen were read with integrated instrumental support - flute perhaps, cello, bass, or baritone saxophone. The highlight was a reading by Hoagy Carmichael of *Tract* by William Carlos Williams with leader Ralph Pena on acoustic bass; Billy Bean, guitar; Larry Bunker, drums; Bob Dorough, piano; and Bob Hardaway, tenor sax. It's the masterpiece of the conjunction of poetry and jazz read by Mr Carmichael with the dramatic power, cadence and sensitivity of a master actor, composer and musician. Its narrative concerns instructions on how to arrange a funeral, but its message is similar to the jazz "message". It's a direct criticism of *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night* in which Dylan Thomas uses many poetic devices or poetic conventions in composition which, Williams argues, obscure the content. Like jazz, Williams was concerned with connecting with another without elaborate structures and literary devices, intending to show off one's skills - much like the blues if you will.



*American poet William Carlos Williams (left): Like jazz, Williams was concerned with connecting with another without elaborate structures and literary devices intending to show off one's skills...*

Perhaps the most distinguished poet associated with jazz was Langston Hughes (1902-1967). Langston was surrounded in his formative years by the apocalyptic jazz of Louis Armstrong, Fletcher Henderson, Bessie Smith and Duke Ellington. He is credited with establishing jazz poetry celebrated in the work *Weary Blues* (1958) with music arranged and conducted by Leonard Feather and Charles Mingus. Langston Hughes was a "political" poet, a poet of protest from his very beginning as a writer. One of his earliest compositions was *Note On Commercial Theatre* (1927) which features on the *Weary Blues* album:

*You've taken my blues and gone —  
 You sing 'em on Broadway  
 And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
 And you mixed 'em up with symphonies*

...

*You also took my spirituals and gone.  
 You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
 And all kinds of Swing Mikados*

*And in everything but what's about me —  
But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me,  
And write about me —  
Black and beautiful —  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!*

*Yes, it'll be me.*



*Langston Hughes:  
perhaps the most  
distinguished poet  
associated with jazz...*

The musicians are Mingus, bass; Jimmy Knepper, trombone; Shafi Hadi, tenor saxophone; Horace Parlan, piano; and Kenny Dennis, drums. Hughes's words have become part of American culture, sometimes providing film titles. Langston Hughes's poem *Harlem* reads as follows:

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

*Or does it explode?*



The phrase “raisin in the sun” became the title of a play by Lorraine Hansberry that debuted on Broadway in 1959. The film with the same title, starring Sidney Poitier, was released in 1961 and in 2008, there was a made-for-television film directed by Kenny Leon and starring Sean Combs (*Puff Daddy* or *Diddy the Rapper*). A 2021 Sydney Theatre Company production directed by Shari Sebbens featured Zahra Newman and Bert La Bonte as leads.

Some of the works on *Weary Blues* are based on the 12-bar blues pattern. Langston Hughes was the precursor to rap, and his association with jazz led to the works of Gil Scott-Heron and his masterpiece *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, which led in turn to Jay Z, Eminem, and Kendrick Lamar, where the vocals have similarities to jazz improvisation.



*Langston Hughes was the precursor to rap and his association with jazz led to the works of Gil Scott-Heron (left)... PHOTO CREDIT MICHAEL OCHS*

Most of the works of Langston Hughes were of protest, or political in nature. His collaboration with Mingus was artistically ground-breaking. In 1993 the Library of Congress acquired Mingus's collected papers — including scores, sound recordings, correspondence and photos — in what they described as "the most important acquisition of a manuscript collection relating to jazz in the Library's history". In 1995 the US postal service issued a stamp in his honour. In 1997 Mingus was posthumously awarded a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. Mingus and Hughes were inspirational figures for the other significant post-WW11 jazz political activist Charlie Haden.

Charlie Haden (1937-2014) was unusual in that he was a white prominent jazz artist who embraced the free jazz movement musically, philosophically and politically. To be musically “free” meant little if you were socially and economically in chains. He joined the Communist Party which in the USA was to be tainted as an “UnAmerican Atheist”, closely associated with the Devil himself. His first band was called the Liberation Music Orchestra and recorded its eponymous album in 1969. Inspired by

the Spanish Civil War (and *Sketches of Spain* by Evans/Davis, one wonders?) he included three Spanish folk songs, one of which had been the inspiration for Coltrane's *Ole*; *War Orphans* by Ornette Coleman; two of his own; and three by Carla Bley who did most of the arrangements. *We Shall Overcome* (Zilphia Horton, Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, Pete Seeger) concluded the programme.



*Carla Bley (left)  
pictured here with  
Charlie Haden, did  
most of the  
arrangements...*

Musicians involved were Perry Robinson, clarinet; Gato Barbieri, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Dewey Redman, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone; Don Cherry, cornet, flute, Indian wood & bamboo flutes; Michael Mantler, trumpet; Roswell Rudd, trombone; Bob Northern, French horn, hand wood blocks, crow call, bells, military whistle; Howard Johnson, tuba; Sam Brown, guitar, Tanganyikan guitar, thumb piano; Carla Bley, piano, tambourine; Charlie Haden, bass; Paul Motian, drums, percussion; and Andrew Cyrille, drums, percussion.

Musically it is considered a very fine suite of music, which features dramatic collective playing accompanied by profound individualism, which would sit uncomfortably with the Leninist version of communism which abhors the individual.

The Liberation Music Orchestra's next album *The Ballad of the Fallen*, didn't appear until 1983. It was voted *Downbeat's* Jazz Album of the Year in the 1984 Jazz Critics Poll. It featured a folk song from El Salvador, and Spanish compositions, with two by Haden and two by Carla Bley who did the arrangements. There were 12 musicians including Dewey Redman, Jimmy Pepper, Don Cherry and Mick Goodrick.

The final album in the trilogy was *Dreamkeeper*, a substantial orchestral work voted *Downbeat's* Jazz Album of the Year in the 1991 Jazz Critics Poll, and nominated for Grammys Best Large Jazz Ensemble Performance. It's major work, the title track in four parts, was inspired by Langston Hughes's poem *As I Grew Older*, the last three stanzas of which read:

*Shadow  
I am black*

*I lie down in the shadow  
No longer the light of the dream before me,  
Above me.  
Only the thick wall.  
Only the shadow.  
My hands!  
My dark hands!  
Break through the wall!  
Find my dream!  
Help me to shatter this darkness,  
To smash this night,  
To break this shadow  
Into a thousand lights of sun,  
Into a thousand whirling dreams  
Of sun!*

There is one Spanish tune, *Rabo De Nube (Tail of the Tornado)* by Silvio Rodriguez; one African, *Nkosi Sikelel' Afrika* by Enoch Sontonga; and two by Haden: *Sandino*, and *Spiritual*, the latter dedicated to Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X. The orchestra consisted of Carla Bley, conductor; Charlie Haden, bass; Dewey Redman, tenor saxophone; Joe Lovano, tenor saxophone; Branford Marsalis, tenor saxophone; Ken McIntyre, alto saxophone; Tom Harrell, trumpet, flugelhorn; Earl Gardner, trumpet; Sharon Freeman, French horn; Ray Anderson, trombone; Joe Daley, tuba; Amina Claudine Myers, piano; Mick Goodrick, guitar; Paul Motian, drums; Don Alias, percussion; Juan Lazzaro Mendolas, pan pipes, wood flutes; and the Oakland Youth Chorus directed by Elizabeth Min. Haden died at 76 years of age in 2014 suffering from the effects of post-polio syndrome, and complications from liver disease.



*Charlie Haden  
(far left)  
pictured here in  
2014, the year he  
died, with  
pianist Geri  
Allen...*

Musically, Duke Ellington was perhaps the first jazz composer to address “race” issues in a more orchestral and structured and formal way, beyond the protest song or the blues. *Symphony in Black: A Rhapsody of Negro Life* is considered one of the first generation of non-classically arranged orchestral scores. It was filmed by Paramount and featured the Duke Ellington Orchestra with Billie Holiday appearing for the first time on film. An extract from it became the masterpiece known as *Saddest Tale* (Ellington) first recorded 12/9/34. On this piece Ellington’s voice appeared on record for the first time. Barney Bigard provides a stunning and sombre introduction, followed by four brilliant solos: Joe Nanton, trombone; Johnny Hodges, alto; Cootie Williams, trumpet; and Harry Carney, bass clarinet; each solo backed by different orchestral colours. Two other extended works by Ellington include *Ebony Rhapsody* and *Black and Tan Fantasy*. Although Ellington was not overtly political, his works and life were powerful political elements in raising black consciousness and the notion that came to be encapsulated in the phrase “black is beautiful”. With the possible exception of Paul Robeson, Ellington’s genius, dignity, appearance, manner and music did most to raise the status of African American art and culture - the African American was not just a jolly entertainer anymore, there to serve the rich and less rich with some fun and escapism, but an artist (elegantly dressed!) of distinguished and groundbreaking achievement across a range of cultures. Ellington’s wide-ranging influence extended to the politically active Archie Shepp.



*With the possible exception of Paul Robeson (right), Duke Ellington’s genius, dignity, appearance, manner and music did most to raise the status of African American art and culture...*

Archie Shepp, now 83 (2021) began studying piano, clarinet, and alto saxophone, but settled on the tenor saxophone with occasional excursions into soprano saxophone. He worked with Cecil Taylor, and later John Coltrane on *A Love Supreme* and *Ascension*. Evidence of the beauty of his sound and the feeling he’s capable of on ballads, is stunningly revealed on his document *Trouble in Mind* (1980) where he

reworks the traditional blues *When Things Go Wrong*, *Court House Blues*, *See See Rider*, *Make Me A Pallet On The Floor*, *St James Infirmary* and selected blues of Richard M Jones, Jimmy Cox, W C Handy, Leroy Carr, St Louis Jimmy Oden, and *Blues in Thirds* by Earl Hines. Pianist Horace Parlan accompanies Shepp.



*Archie Shepp (left) performing with John Coltrane... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST*

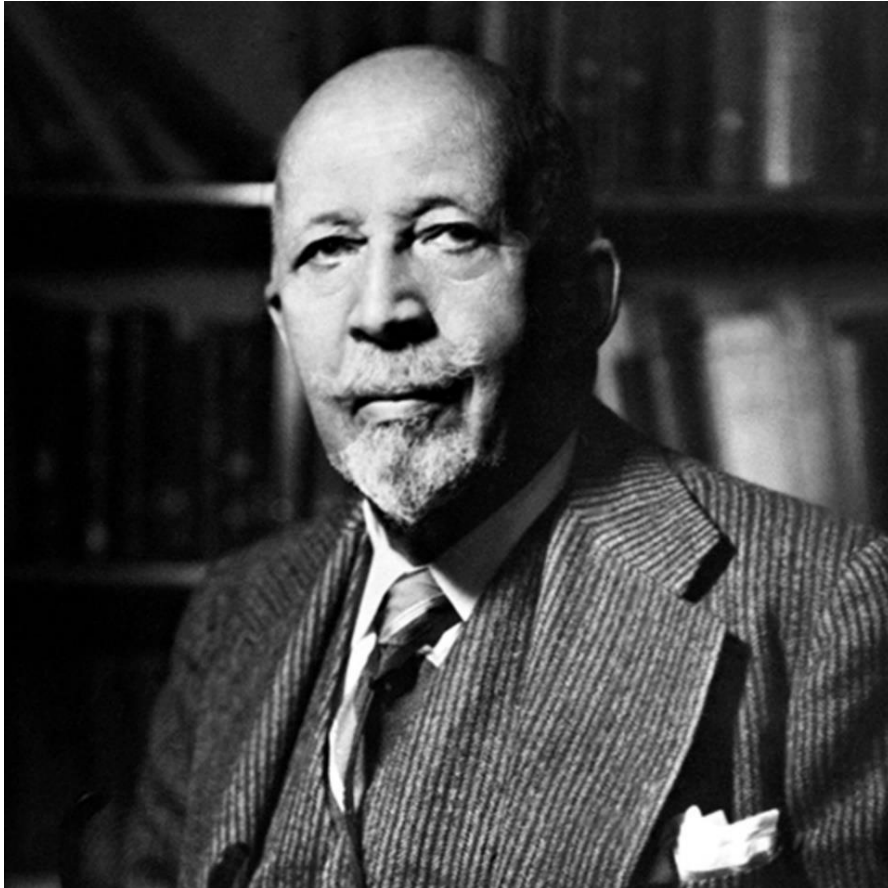
Shepp was central to the free jazz movement and dedicated a number of albums to political issues including *Fire Music* (1965), *On This Night* (1965) and *Attica Blues* (1972) all on Impulse. The first *Fire Music* has three originals by Shepp: *Malcolm*, *Malcolm Semper Malcolm* is dedicated to Malcolm X, and includes a recitation by Shepp; *Los Olvidados (The Forgotten Ones)* is a homage to the film of the same name made by Bunuel in 1950; he also records *Prelude to a Kiss* (Ellington) in homage to the great man.

*On This Night* has a powerful and striking take on Ellington's *In A Sentimental Mood*. The remaining pieces are originals by Shepp including *The Pickaninny (Picked Clean- No More- Or Can You Back Back Doodlebug)*. *On This Night* has Shepp, tenor sax, piano, vocal; Bobby Hutcherson, vibes; David Izenzon, Henry Grimes, bass; Rashied Ali, J C Moses, Joe Chambers, drums, percussion; Ed Blackwell, rhythm logs; and Christine Spencer, vocal.

The title track, a tribute to the American sociologist W E B Du Bois, has Shepp on piano and a haunting vocal from Christine Spencer. Du Bois insisted on full civil rights and increased political representation, which he believed would be brought about by the African American intellectual elite. He believed that African Americans needed the chances for advanced education to develop its leadership. An iconic representative of African American aspirations, he was much admired.



*Attica Blues* was in response to the Attica Prison riots. Shepp wrote plays including *The Communist* (1965) and *Lady Day: A Musical Tragedy* (1972). For 30 years, beginning in 1971, Shepp worked as a Professor Of Music at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and at SUNY, New York. His courses were 'Revolutionary Concepts in African-American Music' and 'Black Musician in the Theater.'



*W E B Du Bois: an iconic representative of African American aspirations and much admired...*

Preceding Shepp's Impulse albums from 1965 was one of the most influential jazz albums ever, both socially and musically. Its genesis was a political decision by drummer Max Roach and Charles Mingus to organise an alternative festival to the Newport Jazz Festival which, organised by (white) George Wein, was very much a middle-class white event focussed on entertainment. A look at the audience in Bert Stern's 1958 film *Jazz On A Summer's Day* will attest to that fact. The Civil Rights movement (1954-1968) was in full swing in 1960, and its energies motivated Roach, Mingus and others to react musically. It's tempting to corral this movement to being just about African Americans in America, but the musical implications and message extended to South African apartheid; and presently to thousands of Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and other ethnic Turkic Muslims, Christians and Kazakhstanis, interned in Chinese concentration camps in 2021; to the Australian Government using the island of Nauru as a dumping ground for immigrants; and to the violence experienced by women in domestic circumstances in suburban Australia. It's a human rights message.

The other motivation was to take control of their own music, free from booking agents, impresarios (Wein), and other middlemen, a sentiment which may resonate still with all jazz musicians wherever they may be. Candid Records, founded in 1960 as a subsidiary of Cadence Records, had as its A&R man Nat Hentoff, who had convinced the Cadence owner Archie Beyer to let him run an exclusively jazz label. Candid's second release was *Max Roach WE INSIST! Freedom Now Suite*, and its fifth *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus*. Both were politically potent and musically brilliant documents, and remain so today, 60 years later. The year Max Roach died (2007) John Fordham in *The Guardian* described the album as a "landmark jazz album" and said that Roach and fellow percussionists "also provided a nutshell summary of drum evolution." The original *Downbeat* review noted that the album "is a vibrant social statement and an artistic triumph." (Notes to the 2011 rerelease by Poll Winners Records, EU).



What was especially interesting about the Roach album, was the support given to it by the older generation of Coleman Hawkins, Roy Eldridge and Jo Jones who referred to the musicians as "kids". Other than Roach (36), they included Booker Little, trumpet (22); Julian Priester, trombone (25); Walter Benton, tenor sax (30); James Schenck, bass; Michael Olatunji, congas (33); Ray Mantilla, percussion (26); Tomas DuVall, percussion; and Abbey Lincoln, voice (29). Hawkins performed as well.

Some of the titles reflect its political message: *Freedom Day* (Roach/Oscar Brown Jr); *Prayer/Protest/Peace* (Roach); and *Tears for Johannesburg* (Roach). The polemic and the music were especially well integrated. *The Penguin Guide to Jazz* lists it as one deserving of a “Crown” for which special “affection” is reserved. Other “Crowned” records include Louis Armstrong’s *Hot Five & Sevens*; Eric Dolphy’s *Out To Lunch*; Coltrane’s *A Love Supreme*; Ellington’s *The Duke at Fargo*; Mingus’s *The Black Saint And The Sinner Lady* and *Mingus Ah Um*; Bill Evans’s *Waltz For Debby*; Tatum’s *The Complete Pablo Solo Masterpieces*; and Miles Davis’s *Kind of Blue*, Miles Davis and Gil Evans’s *The Complete Columbia Studio Sessions*, and *The Complete Live At The Plugged Nickel*.

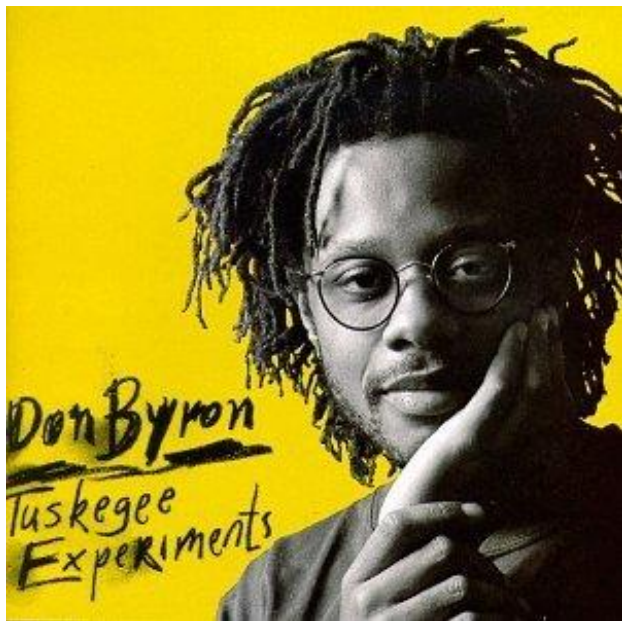
The Mingus album *Charles Mingus presents Charles Mingus* features the working club quartet he had for much of 1960: Charles Mingus, bass; Ted Curson, trumpet; Eric Dolphy, alto saxophone and bass clarinet; and Dannie Richmond, drums. There were four tracks including *Original Faubus Fables* (Mingus) featuring lyrics denouncing segregation directed at Governor Faubus, sung by Dannie Richmond and Mingus. Faubus was the 36th Governor of Arkansas who in 1957 had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent black students from attending Little Rock Central High School, against a ruling by the Supreme Court. The track *All the Things You Could Be by Now If Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother* (Mingus) was notable for its rhythmic innovations: the musicians keep the original structure... but do not even play the tune's chord structure. The piece in general is based on A flat. Again, the rhythms change. There is no set beat, and yet there's an implicit rhythmic flow, up and down throughout the work. Dannie Richmond explained: "The best way I can explain is that we find a beat that's in the air, and just take it out of the air when we want it" (Notes to album).



Other artists inspired to create works out of the Civil Rights Movement include Yusef Lateef, Richard Davis, Harold McKinney, Grachan Moncur, David Lee Jr, Tyrone Washington, Joe Henderson and Doug Hammond.

Perhaps beginning in the 1980s, a new generation of jazz artists emerged, better educated and more aware. They saw the simplicities of rock and roll and fusion as having been exhausted - James Carter, Gerry Hemingway, John Zorn, William Parker, Joshua Redman, and Tim Berne among them. Clarinet player and composer Don Byron released a musically masterful and politically potent document in 1991 called *Tuskegee Experiments* (Elektra/Nonesuch).

In the notes to this album Byron explains the title: “In 1932, the US Public Health Service... initiated the longest human medical experiment in American history. More than half the 400 men chosen had syphilis while the rest formed a non-syphilitic control group. None were informed of their condition and they were observed for over 40 years, but *not* treated, just to document the physical effects of syphilis left unchecked. In the Tuskegee aviation experiment, over-qualified and under-compensated Black men endured unnecessary indignities simply to ‘prove’ they could be trusted to fly military aircraft.” Such experiments prefigured those undertaken in Nazi Germany.



I find the document one of the most beautiful and masterful programmes of music of the 1990s, and it stands as a paradigm of what makes jazz the most significant musical art form in history. Part of the reason is that the story it has to tell is one filled with human passion *in extremis*. Music in its essence is one human communicating feelings with another human through extremely powerful means: powerful rhythms, sweet harmonies and seductive melodies. It is meant to tell a story. Some stories are banal and universal: girl loses boy; boy loses girl; girl wants boy. Some messages are: look how clever I can play! Some stories are couched in much volume, movement, lighting, and group hysteria - rock and roll concerts, the



Rolling Stones etc, but the story may be a simple one. Some brilliant technicians such as James Morrison can play in any genre, but their stories may be ones of cleverness devoid of passion, with few real stories to tell.

The roots of jazz are embedded in one of the greatest stories: to escape bondage to another human and live free. Some performers master one simple instrument - as Robert Johnson did the Kalamazoo KG-14, or Big Bill Broonzy did the Gibson Style O - and tell such powerful stories in such a felt way through their accomplished mastery of their chosen instrument, that the feelings inherent in the sounds resonate far more powerfully than the 100-piece orchestra of Mantovani, or a chorus of 500 voices, let alone the 20-minute performance of *Spoonful* by Cream at Madison Square Garden in 1968. Don Byron's music in this instance is also a powerful story told in musical brilliance by Byron, clarinet and bass clarinet; Bill Frisell, guitar; Lonnie Plaxico, bass; Reggie Workman, bass; Kenny Davis, electric bass; Ralph Peterson Jr, and Pheeroan aKlaff, drums; Edsel Gomez, piano; Great Buck, violin; Richie Schwartz, marimba; Sadiq, poet; and Joe Berkovitz, piano. Apart from Byron, in terms of improvisatory and musical mastery, Frisell's contribution is a mighty one.



*Bill Frisell, pictured two years earlier, in 1989: his contribution is a mighty one...*

There are seven Byron originals and two other compositions *Main Stem* by Ellington and *Auf einer Burg* by Schumann. The former is one of the highlights of the programme and apart from hints of the melody is a remarkable reworking. Solo clarinet opens it in a tone of exuberance and joy, segueing into melodic and rhythmic elements of the original. Frisell ventures into free jazz in his stunning solo. *Tuskegee Strutter's Ball* has rich melody, powerful Frisell guitar, and seems a musical shout about the glorious beauty of life itself.

The poem *Tuskegee Experiment* by performance poet and percussionist Sadiq Bey is read by Bey on the title track. Stanzas two and three read:



*a Dr. Clark conviction  
a Dr. Wenger coverion  
a Dr. Vonderlehr conception  
a Dr. Peters spinal puncture  
a. Dr. Dibble hanging from  
his ankles in the town square,  
the Surgeon General's schwartzegeist rising,  
while Tuskegee falls asleep.*

*bring them to autopsy  
with ulcerated limbs,  
with howling wives,  
having them in, one coon corpse at a time.  
(says Dr. Dibble,)  
“a dollar a year for forty years  
to watch these shadows rot.”  
“they didn't receive treatment for syphilis,  
but they got so much else.  
medicine is as much art as it science.*



*Performance poet and percussionist Sadiq Bey...*

The reading by the poet is punctuated by expressively passionate clarinet by Byron, backed by the rhythm of piano, marimba, bass and drums. *Tuskegee Strutters Ball* refers to the class scorn middle-class black folks feel for people “below” them. *In Memoriam: Uncle Dan* is an achingly beautiful, wistfully gentle, felt piece on bass clarinet, backed by the bass genius of Reggie Workman where you feel all his lifelong dedication to his instrument was saved for this very moment. Some have called the whole programme in reference to the bass ‘a study in pacing’.

Between 1982 and 1990 clarinet player John Carter composed and recorded *Roots and Folklore: Episodes in the Development of American Folk Music*, five albums focused on African Americans and their history. It is one of the most musically accomplished works in jazz.

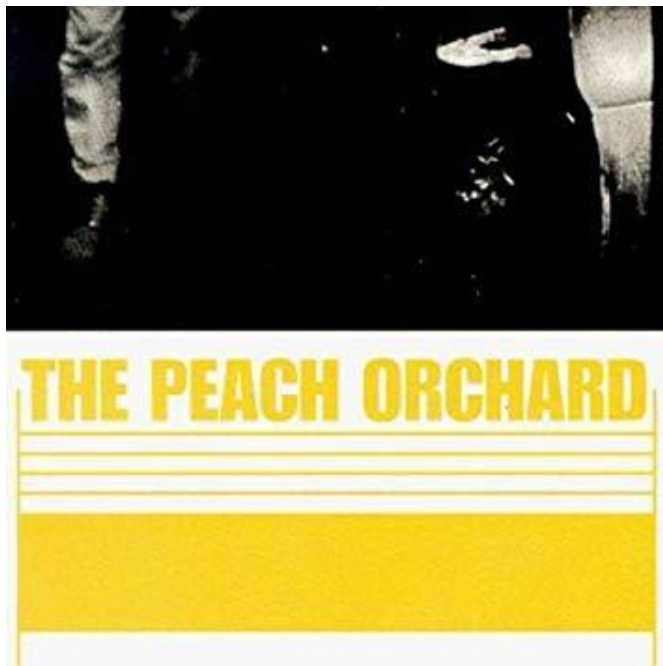
I'd like to reference three works that represent some approaches to politics as drivers for some creative artists. The first by William Parker is called *The Peach Orchard* which is a specific response to a specific event underpinned by a general theme intended to mirror, or is a response to, the 'massive blanketing of America by Europe'. The second by John Coltrane, *Alabama*, is a specific response to a general feeling about a place which has a long and complicated history. The third by Phil Slater called *The Dark Pattern*, I take to be a general response to a general feeling about humanity and its works *now*.

Bassist William Parker is in the tradition of Mingus and Haden both musically in his big sound, and politically with his heightened consciousness and deep intelligence. His 1998 AUM Fidelity double CD *The Peach Orchard* is a specific response to a particular event. There are eight original compositions by the leader. The group Order To Survive consists of Parker, acoustic bass; Cooper-Moore, piano; Rob Brown, alto sax; and Susie Ibarra, drums. The eponymous title track at 21 minutes is a harrowingly beautiful work featuring single-note ascending repetitive percussive up-tempo piano, which begins over painfully expressive human sounding alto saxophone



*Bassist William Parker (left) is in the tradition of Mingus and Haden both musically in his big sound, and politically with his heightened consciousness and deep intelligence...*

verging on panic and hysteria; ratat-tat-tat drumming and bass sounds seem to indicate that the earth itself is throbbing to the thud of falling bodies or moving earth caused by thudding hooves. Parker explains: “..(it) draws its inspiration from the events that took place on the Navaho land in what is now New Mexico. Then great Navaho chief Manuelito and his people were fighting against being pushed out of their homelands by the US Army. Out of all the things the Navaho cultivated they loved their peach orchards the most... their cherished peach orchard was destroyed along with everything else.” (Notes to *The Peach Orchard*). This knowledge and image of the beautiful peaches and the peach trees being crushed and destroyed in war, is quite telling and informs the music with more power.



*Alabama* is a general response to a specific State or system of government triggered by a specific event. It was recorded on 18/11/63 by the John Coltrane Quartet: Coltrane, tenor saxophone; McCoy Tyner, piano; Jimmy Garrison, bass; and Elvin Jones, drums. Recorded in New Jersey by Rudy Van Gelder after an exhausting tour of Europe, it was only one of two compositions recorded in the session. The issued take is a combination of takes four and five, the former being interrupted by Coltrane saying “wrong chord”; the latter being a segment of the theme only. The “wrong chord” remained as Coltrane seemed to think it fitted the theme. Its context is that the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing was a white supremacist terrorist attack in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday, September 15, 1963. On 22/11/63 Kennedy was assassinated. The gentle humanity of Coltrane is reflected in the piece, which seems to mirror the mixed emotions one can have about one’s place of birth (Coltrane was born in the South, in North Carolina), the joyous connections to family, nature, climate, religion, smells, experiences, and the visceral pain of the politics experienced at a personal level. In some performances of Ray Charles doing Hoagy Carmichael’s *Georgia On My Mind*, there are similar emotional contradictions and mix of emotions, which powerfully resonate.



## THE WORK OF THE ORIGINAL TERRORISTS

*The 16th Street Baptist Church bombing was a white supremacist terrorist attack in Birmingham, Alabama, on Sunday, September 15, 1963....*



*The gentle humanity of Coltrane is reflected in the "Alabama" piece... PHOTO CREDIT DAN HUNSTEIN*



My take on *The Dark Pattern* is that it is an impressionistic response to a general calamity. Both climate change and the virus pandemic are existential threats to human life caused by humans despoiling the delicate balance of life on earth. The music of *The Dark Pattern* reveals *inter alia* insistent repetitious piano notes which create a background, suggesting the relentlessness and inevitability of an end coming, possibly a doom-laden one. Yet the work in and of itself is reason for hope as it is an artist's response, representative of millions quietly anxious about what we are doing to ourselves. In some ways there are recollections of J J Johnson's *Lament* (a passionate expression of grief or sorrow) played by Miles Davis (flugelhorn) on the Gil Evans/Miles Davis album *Miles Ahead* (1957). It is this version which helped make the tune a jazz standard, subsequently recorded by Mike Nock (*Touch* 1993), Lester Bowie, Keith Jarrett and featured by Davis in *Miles Davis At Carnegie Hall* (1961).

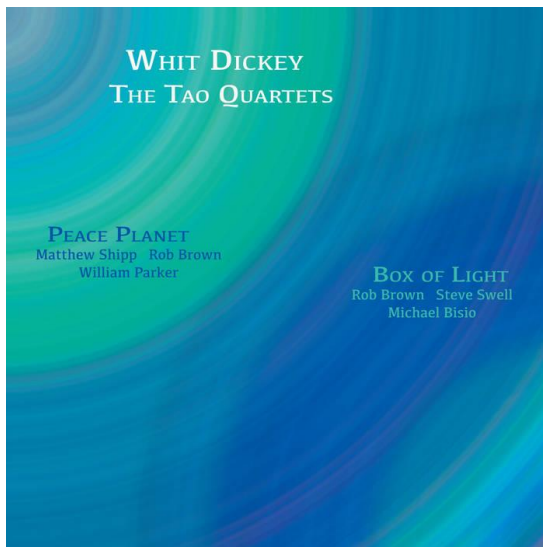


One track with a sax solo seems frantic on *The Dark Pattern*, but the general mood is wistful yearning, played with restrained passion. The programme of 11 compositions are by the leader on trumpet, supported by Matt Keegan, saxophone; Matt McMahon, piano; Brett Hirst, bass; and Simon Barker, drums. It is a particularly fine response by an understated lyricist and modest and thoughtful individual, as opposed to the extrovert or angry passionate “shouting” of a Mingus. The track *Mnemosyne* refers to the goddess of memory, the daughter of heaven and earth. *The Dilemma Throw* suggests a difficult choice; *Glow* brightness or warmth; *The Opal* is the National Gemstone of Australia; the *Third Bell* - bells are a symbol of God's voice; *The Promise* - God's Goodness; *The Golden Seam* - goodness exists amongst the dirt or ordinary. *Seven* symbolises perfection and completeness. In short, without any guidance from notes by the composer, one may draw conclusions or references or context, by paying attention to the titles of the compositions, as the music in its abstract beauty, may be



taken a number of ways. Some may see no political references at all, and my take as drawing a long bow.

A comparable analysis of a contemporary example which has parallels to *The Dark Pattern* in that it represents a general response to general issues is *Whit Dickey The Tao Quartets* (AUM Fidelity) in 2018/2019. Taoist thought focuses on genuineness, longevity, wu wei (non-action, a natural action, a perfect equilibrium with tao) and spontaneity. The first document is titled *Peace Planet* and the second *Box of Light*. Gentle lyricism and rhythmic/melodic invention such as the music on *The Dark Pattern*, is the tone. On the former suite drummer Dickey is supported by William Parker, bass; Rob Brown, alto; and Matthew Shipp, piano. On the latter more lively programme, Dickey is supported by Steve Swell, trombone; Rob Brown, alto; and Michael Bisio, bass.



*Drummer Whit Dickey: Taoist thought focuses on genuineness, longevity, wu wei (non-action, a natural action, a perfect equilibrium with tao) and spontaneity...*

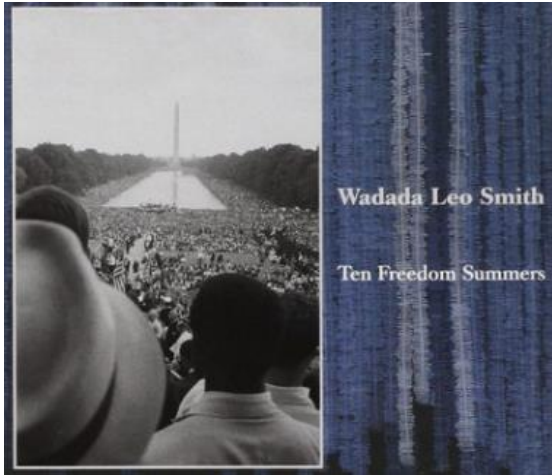
Recent examples of documents released by jazz artists of serious accomplishment, include Christian McBride's *The Movement Revisited: A Musical Portrait of Four Icons* (Mack Avenue, 2020), a suite the composer has been working on since 1998. The four icons are Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Martin Luther King, Jr. The use of an 18-piece big band, chorus and narrator, is in the tradition of Archie Shepp's *Attica Blues*, Bobby Hutcherson's *Now!* and Max Roach's *Percussion Bitter Sweet*. Part of the suite is in response to the brutal backlash occurring in the USA to the election of America's first black President.



Another is Wayne Escoffery's *Vortex* (Sunnyside, 2018). There are six originals, with two by drummer Ralph Peterson Jr, and one by trumpet player Tom Harrell. The band is Escoffery, tenor saxophone; David Kikoski, piano; Ugonna Okegwo, bass; and Ralph Peterson Jr, drums; with special guests Jeremy Pelt, trumpet, on Escoffery's *In His Eyes*; Kush Abadey, drums on Escoffery's *The Devil's Den* and *In His Eyes*; and Jaqueline Acevedo, percussion, on Harrell's *February* (Escoffery was a member of Tom Harrell's band for a decade); Escoffery's *The Devil's Den*, and *Tears For Carolyn*. *Devil's Den* refers to the chaos President Trump has created. *In His Eyes* refers to the riots his nine-year-old son witnessed, following the death of Freddie Gray in April 2015.

*Ten Freedom Summers* is a four-album suite intermittently composed by trumpet player Wadada Leo Smith over the course of 34 years, beginning in 1977. It was performed live in November 2011 at the Colburn School's Zipper Hall in Los Angeles. *Ten Freedom Summers* comprises 19 pieces. Smith explains: "I was born in 1941 and

grew up in segregated Mississippi and experienced the conditions which made it imperative for an activist movement for equality. I saw that stuff happening. Those are the moments that triggered this. It was in that same environment that I had my first dreams of becoming a composer and performer.” The subsequent quartet performances featured drummers Pheeroan akLaff and Susie Ibarra, pianist Anthony Davis, and bassist John Lindberg. Smith’s *America’s National Parks* (Cuneiform Records, 2017) which is a tribute to the natural environment, was Critics’ *Downbeat* Album of the Year.



*Trumpeter Wadada Leo Smith: “Ten Freedom Summers” is a four-album suite intermittently composed by him over the course of 34 years, beginning in 1977...*

Contemporary Australian artists such as bassist Alex Boneham have featured in powerful political documents such as Eric Reed’s *For Such A Time As This* (Smoke, 2020) with Reed, piano; Boneham, bass; Kevin Kanner, drums; Chris Lewis, tenor and soprano saxophones; and Henry Jackson, vocals. Reed explains: “What you hear on this album are works that I created in response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, the Covid 19 pandemic and the death of Wallace Roney, among



other concerns.” In 2020 Duke Ellington is still considered relevant to major artists like Reed, who performs *Come Sunday* as a solo piano piece to moving effect.



*Eric Reed: a response to the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, the Covid 19 pandemic, and the death of Wallace Roney...*

This younger Australian jazz cohort seems much more in tune so to speak with both the music’s roots and its purpose, and of contemporary political forces at play, Barney McAll, and Julien Wilson being prime examples. Jeremy Rose (cf *Liminality* and the immersive *Iron in the Blood* performed by his 17-piece Earshift Orchestra, the former inspired by immigrant detention on Nauru and the latter by Robert Hughes’s majestic history *The Fatal Shore*) is a leading instance of a specific artistic response to specific political events, contemporary and historical.



*Australia’s Jeremy Rose: a specific artistic response to specific political events, contemporary and historical...PHOTO COURTESY THE AUSTRALIAN*

Whilst this music continues to engage with its origins and purpose it will thrive. If it begins to drift into art for art’s sake, it will wither.